GOD'S CURIOUS CHOICES
Luke 5:1-11
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John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, OH

So very much of the life you and I like is shaped, influenced and determined by the power of celebrity. There is a fine young basketball player for Georgetown University, named Patrick Ewing, whose affectation is a plain gray T-shirt which he wears under his uniform. Sure enough, at a 7th grade basketball tournament in which I was involved yesterday most of the young centers wore a T-shirt under their uniform.

When E.T., that friendly visitor from outer space, was lured into the world of human beings by a trail of Reese's Pieces, that hitherto relatively unknown candy became a best seller. And when Clark Gable took off his shirt, revealing a bare chest, modest and traditional American men took heed and for a while the sales of men's underwear shirts dropped dramatically.

Even religion - or especially religion - is swept along by the same tide...When President Nixon's Assistant, Charles Colson, wrote a book "Born Again", and President Carter used the same terminology, and an assortment of movie stars and professional athletes made public confession of the same kind of faith experience, the "Born Again" phenomenon began to have a major impact on the ecclesiastical landscape.

The need for heroes and heroines is not new, nor is the public adoration and celebration of the gifted and the strong. But it is healthy, on occasion, to acknowledge that for most of us, life will be ordinary by these criteria. Thus, it was almost with a sense of relief that I read recently about a new organization, "The Dull Men's Club". The gender designation is not significant I assume, in that there seem to be as many dull women as dull men in the world. The founder and president of the organization, Mr. Joseph L. Traise, says that it is for "The millions who do not wear designer jeans, are not listed in Who's Who, never joined a fitness club and wear pajamas to bed." The club's only publication will be "Who's Nobody in America": a list of some 230 million names. If you are wondering if you qualify for membership, Mr. Traise suggests the following "Dullness Exam":

You are dull if...when someone mentions ERA, you think they're talking about Earned Run Averages, potato chips, or real estate.
...if you refer to the person with whom you live as your husband or wife;
...if you have ever been a member of a bowling league.

Only slightly less facetiously, Mr. Traise says his organization is necessary because "Behind every flashy facade sits a fastidiously competent drone who keeps the whole ship afloat."

That part is an overstatement, but essentially true, of course. Most of us will not be the President of the country, or the company, or even the PTA. Even in this gathering, it is true that the vast majority will not become Chief Executive Officer, will not be recognized much for outstanding accomplishment, will never come in first. Celebrity is something most of us experience from a distance.

We have done that a lot. We have also prettied up the scenario along the way. Nothing is further from the ordinariness of it all than the classical nativity - with modest, white-robed virgin, sweet smelling hay, lovely stable. In fact, it was very dirty. It was a barn. They were there because they were a pair of nobodys from an obscure village nobody cared about. It was probably utterly dark: Mary gave birth to her child and there was no light. There was no hot water, no towels, no sheets.

The actual scene would have been rough and most ordinary. It was not, in any sense, what one might perceive as a "religious" event. It is so hidden under layers of Christmas customs, nativity scenes, and Hallmark cards so as to be virtually invisible - but in the original story the birth of Jesus is so very ordinary it requires someone to point out, call attention to, the fact that there is something of great significance happening in the ordinary event of human birth. The somebody, of course, is the angel. It's the angel's task throughout to point to the deeper significance of what appears to be common. If you have ever had the privilege of looking at great art in the presence of someone who truly knows a lot about it, you have experienced what angels do - pointing to the importance of nuances and details that you and I are inclined not even to notice.

What you need this morning, I propose, is not a sermon on the incarnation but an angel: to celebrate the mystery of God's love in a human birth and, more, to recognize this day the presence of God's healing, powerful, reconciling love in the ordinariness of your life.

To that end I wish to read, briefly, portions of short stories: one, simply fun; the other, rather profound. The first is the delightful story, The Best Christmas Pageant Ever: about an unruly, haphazard bunch of ragamuffins from the wrong side of the tracks who take over the Christmas pageant at a proper Presbyterian Church; and in ending up with the important parts give the pageant some new authenticity. The pageant is on, the congregation is humming "O Little Town of Bethlehem" and the two Herdman youngsters - the terrors of the town - are about to make their entrance as Mary and Joseph...

> "I guess we would have gone on humming till we all turned blue, but we didn't have to. Ralph and Imogene were there all right, only for once they didn't come through the door pushing each other out of the way. They just stood there for a minute as if they weren't sure they were in the right place - because of the candles, I guess, and the church being full of people. They looked like the people you see on the six o'clock news - refugees, sent to wait in some strange ugly place, with all their boxes and sacks around them.
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> "It suddenly occurred to me that this was just the way it must have been for the real Holy Family, stuck away in a barn by people who didn't much care what happened to them. They couldn't have been very neat and tidy either, but more like this Mary and Joseph (Imogene's veil was cockeyed as usual, and Ralph's hair stuck out all around his ears). Imogene had the baby doll but she wasn't carrying it the way she was supposed to, cradled in her arms. She had it slung up over her shoulder, and before she put it in the manger she thumped it twice on the back.

God, according to this prophet, is going to use pagan Assyria to discipline his people. The Assyrians neither believe in him nor care anything about him. That is an enormous assertion. God is going to use a pagan nation to establish justice with in his chosen nation. Later, in a portion of the book of Isaiah written during the exile, Cyrus the Persian is called the Servant of God. In this case Cyrus defeats the Babylonians and send the Jews home to the promised land. He is not a believer, but the prophet clearly believes that the Lord God is using Cyrus and is deeply involved in the decision Cyrus is making. One of the more ambitious motifs in the Bible is that God's commitment to justice is so strong that he uses even nations which otherwise do not seem to have much to commend them, to establish it...It may make you and me squirm to be told that popular revolutions against oppressive dictators - even when financed by the United States - fall into this category, but the suggestion is consistent with the Bible.

God makes some very curious choices, through the birth of an infant to a poor, unmarried couple, and that son's growth and maturity on the perimeters of his culture to his own vocation which was noticeably lacking in power, public esteem and respectabililty. His own choices come through the second lesson this morning. "I will make you fishers of men." he told his friends.

Who were they and what did they have that attracted Jesus to them? It is the mystery of election again, because they weren't much, really. They were fishermen mostly. And while some scholars romanticize them by suggesting that their trade equipped them with special gifts of strength, patience, judgment, and courage, I confess that that always sounded contrived to me. We would have recruited a good corporate organizer, a planner, an accountant, a banker, several rabbis, and the best P.R. firm in Galilee. We Presbyterians need the constant reminder that in intellectual, organizations, theological terms the disciples were modest, to put it mildly. They hadn't heard about long range planning, management by objectives, nor the Trinity, nor Incarnation. They hadn't the foggiest notion of a Christology, or an Ecclesiology.

Jesus saw something in them, each one of them, which had potential usefulness in his kingdom. It was, I am coming to see, something latent, something which was hidden and had to be called out of them. And whatever it was he saw in them, I believe it was something they needed to develop in order to become whole human beings.

They became his disciples and whole human beings when they said "yes" to him: not when they passed an exam in Bible and theology, but when they took the couragious step of acknowledging that they had been chosen and decided to go with it, to follow where it was leading.

It isn't always conscious - this dynamic we are discussing...Young men and women who are registering their intent to become ministers and are being taken under care of Presbytery, must answer this question: "Do you, as far as you know your own self, believe you are called to ministry?" It is a difficult question, an embarrassing question. Who, after all wants to presume to stand up and say God chose me?